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TERREBONNE

Terrebonne is a French word meaning "good earth." On the east-central Gulf coast of Louisiana there is a parish (or county) named Terrebonne, and there the land is literally good black earth--rich top-soil deposited there years ago by the annual overflows of the Mississippi River. About 12 miles from Houma, the parish seat, the Farm Security Administration has established the first cooperative farm enterprise of its kind in Louisiana--one of the first in the nation.

This 5,705-acre rural community bears the name of the parish in which it is almost entirely located--Terrebonne. Headquarters are at Schriever, a town which adjoins the property. Prior to its purchase by the Government, the land was farmed largely as sugar-cane plantations and at times grazed by cattle. Twenty years ago it was all in a cane and corn rotation; during the boom days before the World War there were more than 2,000 acres in cane alone on the plantations. After the war, disease hit the canes and the cane acreage was reduced to almost nothing.

In the early 1930's many farmers in the Gulf coast farming area were losing their farms and equipment as a result of adverse economic conditions. Younger farm families coming into manhood and womanhood during the depression found themselves unable to take advantage of their education, ability, and reputation, and many were forced to earn their living by literally mining the soil in unproductive tenancy arrangements. It was to resettle such stranded families from 19 parishes comprising the Louisiana "Sugar Bowl" and the Red River Valley that the Resettlement Administration in 1935 planned the agricultural community-type project known as Terrebonne. Final approval of the development was given in June 1936.

Methods of Development

The original purchase embraced 3,180 acres of rich land which had been lying idle for a number of years.

It was determined that the most effective way of using this land to aid in the rehabilitation of low-income farmers would be to lease it under a short-term lease to the Louisiana Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, which had been set up for local administrative purposes by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Under this arrangement the corporation put a large portion of the cultivable land to sugar-cane. Additional land was soon added to enlarge the project to a more efficient size.

Under this temporary arrangement, 32 rural rehabilitation families chosen from the area began farming the Terrebonne acreage. It was anticipated that definite plans would shortly be worked out for the complete development of the project. The winter of 1937 brought a disastrous freeze, however, and the corporation was unable to meet the terms of its lease. At the end of 1938, after two years of operation at a deficit, the corporation's lease on Terrebonne was cancelled.

The Government and the Terrebonne families immediately set about to work out more satisfactory farming and management plans. A cooperative device was decided upon, which not only offered new opportunities for self-development through participation in community management, but it also was particularly adapted to cane production. Cooperative use of heavy machinery promised an extremely efficient enterprise.

Accordingly, the community farmers organized Terrebonne Farm, Inc., under the laws of Louisiana, and applied to the Farm Security Administration (which had succeeded the Resettlement Administration) for a loan of $415,629 with which to develop and operate the project on a cooperative basis. The Farm Security Administration approved the loan in June 1938. Six months later the Terrebonne project was taken over by the cooperative association under a 99-year lease.

The cost of the 5,705 acres which were eventually included in the development amounted to $147,374, or less than $26 an acre.

Community Organization

Original development plans called for the resettlement of 80 farm families at Terrebonne. At present there are housing facilities for 72 families in the community.

To be accepted on the project, a farmer has to be either a tenant farmer or a farm laborer whose debt burdens can be adjusted through amicable arrangement with his creditors. Preference is given to farmers owning some subsistence livestock. The age limit is from 25 to 45 years.

A small operating loan, averaging about $100, is made by the Farm Security Administration to each of the families to enable them to get started. The loan, repayable over a period of five years at 5 percent interest, includes an amount sufficient to purchase a membership certificate in the cooperative association. An amount of $30 is provided in each family's budget for medical care, arrangements being made with local physicians for services on a fee basis.

The affairs of the cooperative association are conducted by a Board of Directors elected by the general membership. During the first few years the board is being aided by the Government in developing the association's business. A manager is employed to manage the business under the direction of the board.

The full-time staff, under supervision of the manager, includes a home supervisor who helps prepare home management plans and who helps the community women to learn canning, cooking, sewing, purchasing, and other home economics activities; and a farm supervisor who is in charge of the cooperative farming operations and aids the farmers on their individual

plots.

The $415,629 loan to the association is divided into two parts. One part amounting to $280,449 provided for fixed capital investment and is repayable in 40 years at 3 percent interest. This money has been used for construction of houses and outbuildings, farmstead improvements, fencing, water supply, cisterns, privies, drainage, and road improvement. The other part of the loan is being used for operating capital. It amounts to $134,980 and is repayable in 10 years. Operating expenses include the costs of running the cooperative farm, which embraces all land except the homestead units, community center, and waste land.

Terrebonne is leased to the association on a share-crop basis. The annual rental is defined in the lease as (1) cash equivalent of 1/5 of the cane and 1/4 of other crops, (2) $3 per acre for pasture land actually used by the association, and (3) $7.50 per acre on the 4-acre tracts actually sub-leased by the association to its members.

Each family has one representative in the cooperative and casts one vote in the determination of the association's policies.

Farm and Home Operations

Home sites for the 72 families have been laid out and the dwellings built by private contractors. Terrebonne houses are of frame construction and have been erected to provide the utmost convenience and comfort for the money and to meet the health needs of the family.

Four different plan-types were used. Four houses have three bedrooms, a kitchen and a living-room; 12 others have the same number of rooms, but are differently arranged; 29 also have the same number of rooms, but are arranged in a third style. Twenty-seven of the houses have three bedrooms, a combination kitchen-dining room, and a living-room. Each unit has a cypress stave cistern and a sanitary privy.

Each family unit occupies six acres. Under the terms of a written work and occupancy agreement entered into by each association member, the association permits the member to occupy two acres rent-free. These two acres contain the dwelling and outhouses, including a barn and chicken coop. The remaining four acres go into a garden, an orchard, feed and seed growing, and livestock pasturage. For the four acres each member pays an annual rent of $7.50 per acre, or a total of $30, and the proceeds from the sale of crops raised on the unit belong to the individual lessee. In turn, the member agrees to work for the association on the cooperative acreage at the wage rate prescribed by the Board of Directors and at such time as the manager finds his labor needed.

Terrebonne families follow sound farm and home management plans,

worked out with the expert aid of the community supervisors, on their individual plots. Their six acres are utilized in about the following manner: Irish potatoes followed by corn--2 acres; snap beans followed by corn--1 acre; pasture for hogs and milk cow--2 acres; home garden--1/2 acre; house site--1/2 acre.

Development of the 6-acre individual plots helps to utilize the entire family's labor supply to the best advantage, and produces a supplemental cash income which aids in raising the family's standard of living.

Cooperative Farming

The remaining agricultural lands are operated cooperatively for the production of sugar-cane, corn, potatoes, and beans. Terrebonne farmers are assigned, so far as practicable, to the work for which they are best fitted. That is, some may be tractor operators, others plowhands, and others may take care of stock. Each is paid for his labor at a rate proportionate to that paid in that locality for the same work, as provided in the work a nd occupancy agreement.

At the end of each year, the cooperative's surplus funds, which remain after amortization charges, overhead, operating expenses, and money for a reserve fund have been met, are distributed among the farmers. Each worker gets a share proportionate to the number of hours of work he has put in during the year. Only family heads participate in year-end dividend payments, although all members of the family receive wage payments for any work done on the cooperative acreage.

In this way Terrebonne farmers are likely to achieve a stability which would not be possible if they farmed separately. They have three sources of income to depend upon: their daily wages, which should pay for living expenses; proceeds from sale of produce raised on the land set aside for truck crops; and patronage dividends from the cooperative enterprise.

The association sets up subsidiary cooperatives to carry on special projects that tie in with a well-balanced, diversified agricultural program. At the end of 1939, cooperative facilities at Terrebonne included: livestock, heavy machinery and equipment, marketing enterprise, houses and outbuildings, farmstead improvements, utilities, roads and drainage. Other cooperative facilities being considered are a grist mill, potato storage plant, cooperative store, and possibly a cannery, quick freezing plant or even a refrigerating plant. The latter would produce year-round supplemental income from shrimps, frog legs and muskrat fur.

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Cropping at Terrebonne

About 70 percent of the gross cash income has been derived from the sale of sugar-cane. Under a careful farm management program, cane is rotated with other crops in such a way as to conserve the soil and get a uniform long-run yield. Four different varieties of cane are being grown in order to achieve a better labor distribution, hedge against early freezes, and obtain the highest yield of sugar per acre.

Other crops are being rapidly developed at Terrebonne. Early Irish potatoes, for example, are well favored in the program because of climatic conditions. The labor requirements of this crop fit well into the labor distribution for the farm as a whole. The potatoes will be harvested early enough to grow a crop of corn on the same land.

Two carloads of seed potatoes were purchased early in 1940. The association will plant 90 acres of potatoes this spring and an additional 25 acres raised by homesteaders on their small plots will bring the Terrebonne total to 115 acres, or 40 carloads, normally, for shipment. An additional fall crop of about 125 acres will be grown by homesteaders.

Last year the cooperative had a 14-acre tract of land under irrigation, about 8 acres of which were planted in cauliflower, Creole onions and cabbage. Part of this was harvested before the freeze. The cooperative's irrigated land can be increased this season to a total of 60 acres and will include, in addition to the vegetables named above, Brussels sprouts, broccali, shallots, and garlic.

In addition, vegetables may be planted on the 6-foot cane beds. Last year there were 200 acres of mixed vegetables planted in this way but the crops were almost entirely ruined by the freeze. Spinach, beets, turnips, rutabagas and mustard greens comprise the vegetable crop. This year there will be about 100 acres of vegetables planted on the cane beds.

Three market channels are being used in the sale of vegetables: (1) a small roadside stand on the project, (2) the Little French Market of Thibodoux, and (3) the Farmers Market and the French Market in New Orleans. Ready transportation facilities are at hand via the Southern Pacific Railroad, whose main line runs through the development, and the two main highways which skirt the property.

Corn is the chief grain crop grown in the cane belt. The fertility of the soil and moisture conditions combine to produce a good yield and the labor requirements fit nicely into the cooperative farming plan. The combination of soy-beans grown in corn works well into the sugar-cane rotation, and provides soil-building elements as well as help in meeting the community's feed and seed requirements.

The association plans to produce sufficient soy-bean hay to meet

all of the hay requirements for both its own livestock and also the livestock belonging to the individual clients. Hay will be sold to the clients at a fair market value. Oats, clover and alfalfa are included in the rotation plans for pasture and feeding. Soil-building crops other than soy-beans will include cow peas and mixed peas. Melilotus Indica will be planted with the plant cane to be plowed under in the spring.

Land is now being cleared and pastures fenced preparatory to engaging in a cooperative livestock program. The cattle and hog enterprise is designed to utilize the waste products. The cattle will be pastured in the woods lot pasture for approximately 10 months during the year and be fed roughage for the remaining 2 months. Brood sows will be kept for the production of feeder pigs to supply the individual client's needs. A few of the pigs will run in the lot with the workstock, thereby producing pork at very little additional expense.

Working for the Future

It was not necessary to erect any community buildings at Terrebonne as the big house of the St. George Plantation near Shriever was in excellent condition at the time of the project's construction, and is still used as a community building and demonstration center. The new houses and individual farm units are scattered throughout the nearby countryside, interspersed between the cooperative farm plots and uncleared woodland. Most of the individual units are within two miles of the community center, the farthest being less than three miles away.

A public grade school is located close to the development, and high school students are accomodated at Houma, a few miles away. St. Brigette Catholic Church adjoins the property (most of the families in the Terrebonne area are Catholics).

Roadway amounting to 7.36 miles has been constructed with accompanying drainage ditches, culverts and bridges. The roads are surfaced with pit run clam shells, oyster shells or sand clay gravel. Plans have been drawn up for the construction of additional roads and a field drainage system.

Various community activities have been started, and many new enterprises are being developed by the community families. Craft sales of carpenter work, metal work and broom making for the men, and fancy basket work and weaving for the women, are to be established as soon as training is made available and markets can be developed for the new products.

The attitude of the Terrebonne population is illustrated by a statement made by one of them. Milton Toups, a 42-year old tenant farmer, said: "I think we are going to put it over. I think everybody will get

together and work hard and put it across. I know I'll make a better living. I was born and reared on plantations and I've raised sugar-cane, corn and beans all my life. This is all the work that I know how to do, but I've never been able to get anywhere. Now I'm on the project and I'm going to make a better living. I'm working now and getting paid for it, and when we make a crop I'll get part of the profits. I've got three chances to make money, and there isn't a kick on anything."

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